

BUILD BACK BETTER



A UCC Climate Assembly

22nd February - 5th March



UCC
SOCIETIES
SPARK NEW INTERESTS.

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Introduction

UCC Build Back Better was the first climate assembly to be held in a university in Ireland. This climate assembly was held as a collaboration between Green Campus, UCC Societies and the Students' Union aiming to give a platform to the UCC community to voice their concerns, and their hopes for what UCC will do in terms of climate action.

The assembly consisted of a survey that was sent to all students and staff, and eight themed workshops that were run over the course of 2 weeks. Each theme aligned with the themes outlined in [UCC's Sustainability Strategy](#). Each workshop was facilitated by a student and a UCC staff member with responsibility for delivering elements of the Sustainability Strategy and a researcher with expertise in the particular theme. Workshop attendees were given a short introduction to the workshop theme, and presented with UCC's progress and current status for each theme. Facilitated discussions were encouraged in order to gather perspectives and opinions from stakeholders, and to see what students and staff want from UCC, the areas we are doing well in, and the areas that we need to improve.

While UCC's achievements to date were acknowledged, each workshop identified multiple gaps and areas for improvement if UCC is to be serious about climate action, and wants to maintain its leading position in the international community. We must continue to improve and push our institutions to fight for climate action and climate justice, and the pace of progress must be increased if we are to react proportionally to the global environmental crisis. UCC is in a unique position as an institution to bring much needed change and action, for a fairer, equitable and sustainable world. Consisting of almost 23,000 students and 3,000 staff, UCC has an important role to play, locally, nationally and globally in fighting this climate crisis.

Findings

The findings of Build Back Better are detailed below. The feedback we received from students and staff is summarised in the section below. While sustainability is a journey, the need for high-reaching optimistic goals is necessary. In alignment with the UCC Sustainability Strategy the findings are presented under the following themes:

- Sustainability Citizenship
- Teaching and Learning
- Research
- Food, Health & Wellbeing
- Landscape, Heritage and Natural Resources
- Recycling and Waste Management
- Energy, Water and Climate Change
- Procurement and Contracts
- Commuting and Business Travel

Sustainability Citizenship

Engagement from UCC staff, students and the wider community in these areas are integral for UCC in improving its commitment to sustainability. In the current Sustainability Strategy, the main goal under Sustainability Citizenship is ‘to engage [the] student body, staff and wider community in becoming active citizens for sustainability’. There are ten indicators which are being used to measure progress under this goal. We created a survey, using these indicators as the foundation for our research. This enabled us to effectively illustrate the progress and challenges which are impacting successful sustainability citizenship within the UCC community. The inputs we received from UCC students and staff members at the climate assembly workshop also further supported our findings from the survey.

Overall, it is evident that students and staff feel they lack the capacity, including time, accessibility and resources, to effectively engage with sustainability initiatives and or organisations in UCC. Awareness around sustainable initiatives/organisations within the college was also poor, with the vast majority of participants claiming they only are somewhat aware. Concerns were raised that it is difficult to feel the culture of sustainability within UCC if you are not within a specific ‘circle’, hence there is a need for sustainability to be better integrated and made accessible to all staff, students and departments across UCC.

Teaching and Learning

Teaching and learning, in essence, is at the core of UCC's principles. Hence it is essential that the education that is offered throughout various formal and informal courses and activities within UCC encompasses elements of sustainability, where appropriate. Opinions from staff and students on this topic depict a disconnect between course material and the reality of sustainability in the wider world. It was highlighted that only courses which actively deal with such topics, tend to be the ones to draw direct links. In order for UCC to achieve its goal of '[facilitating] the development and empowerment of future leaders in sustainability through [its] teaching and learning', as is stated in the Sustainability Strategy, there should be more scope for students and staff to engage with wider global issues through their course material, whether their course directly links to sustainability issues or not.

The UCC Academic Strategy places 'Sustainability' at the core of the 'Connected Curriculum' and recent collaborative efforts between CIRTL and Green Campus to develop an SDG Toolkit and support educators in integrating sustainability into the curriculum should be applauded. It has been highlighted that many educators are at the beginning of the sustainability journey, and must be guided in their integration of education for sustainable development into their programmes. Such supports are valuable and must be resourced and maintained after the current funding expires, so that academic and teaching staff have continued support in developing a curriculum that will nurture sustainability knowledge, values and skills in graduates of UCC.

Research

UCC produces world class research, and flagship institutes such as the ERI & MaREI demonstrate that sustainability, climate change and environment are a real research priority of the university. However, the environmental impacts of conducting research is also important to consider. Research labs are an essential part of the university which run year round, and have continued to run during the pandemic, even when the majority of on campus activity had stopped. It was reported that despite campus being at approximately 20% occupancy, research facilities continued to consume significant amounts of energy, and generate large amounts of waste. Workshop participants expressed annoyance at the lack of structure in place to make labs more sustainable. The need to reevaluate the way that our labs work is necessary to reduce energy consumption and the large amounts of waste that they produce. Single use items are regularly used in labs, many of which are plastics. There are alternatives available and they should be used where possible. We are conscious that since our workshops took place a Green Lab initiative has been piloted in a number of research labs across UCC, this pilot programme must be resourced and systematically expanded across all research facilities, setting ambitious targets for research activities, in order to have impact at a proportionate scale.

The Green Campus Living Laboratory Seed Fund has proven a valuable resource in linking the research community, and practitioners on campus with applied efforts to address real world sustainability issues at hand and create avenues of outreach and engagement. Efforts should be made to continue support for the Green Campus Living Laboratory, and the expansion of this seed fund to include more applied research. Specific consideration should be given to projects that are impactful to the student body, and engage with those that are not normally exposed to action for sustainability.

Food, Health and Wellbeing

Offering food choices that are both sustainably sourced (i.e locally produced or low carbon footprint) and of high nutritional value is an essential part of enhancing the health and sustainability of the University. From our survey and climate assembly workshop on the topic of Food, Health and Wellbeing, members of the UCC community felt that the availability and affordability of healthy and sustainable food options could be improved across all areas of campus. Participants voiced that there were not always sustainable food options made available across campus, with most meat free options being on main campus, meaning that a warm plant based meal is not always accessible to all students. UCC's catering partners, KSG, have previously demonstrated that they are willing to take on sustainability challenges to great success (e.g. BioGreen Plastic Free Café), this relationship and willingness to participate must be built upon, encouraging our service providers to expand their commitments to sustainability by ensuring that healthy, local and sustainable food options, including plant based diets, are accessible and affordable to all students

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted, more than ever, the vulnerabilities of student health and wellbeing, especially in periods of high pressure and stress. The university environment is a challenging environment for all, but these challenges have become particularly exasperated in recent times. During our workshops it was evident that students feel unsupported by the counselling services offered on campus as a result of mental health facilities having long waiting lists and overprescribing medications. A theme of reactive responses to student mental health emerged during conversations with students, and desires for preventative measures be put in place were expressed. Such supports should include the provision of compassionate and empathic learning environments, cognisant of student wellbeing, as well as the creation of peaceful, restful and restoring spaces on campus. In terms of UCC staff members, it was voiced that staff wellbeing initiatives are often run during lunch breaks and limit those who can attend. Staff also reported often being too thinly spread to allow time for participating in self care initiatives.

We have seen the impact that climate change is already having on young people's mental health, with eco-grief and eco-anxiety being widely reported. As an institution, UCC has a great

responsibility and duty of care toward its citizens, it must thus properly resource its health & wellbeing services and infrastructure, because as with many things, climate change will continue to exacerbate our existing problems.

Landscape, Heritage and Natural Resources

The external environment and landscape of UCC is much admired for its aesthetic beauty, mature grounds, and rich heritage. During our workshop the competing interests of managing the landscape of UCC were outlined. In addition to being aesthetic, the UCC grounds must function as a resource for teaching/research, wellbeing, biodiversity conservation, built/cultural heritage, and recreation. It was clear from the workshop that participants greatly valued our outdoor space, and recognised the benefits of green spaces. However, there was a feeling that more needed to be done to encourage people to use these spaces. This must go hand in hand with making sure these spaces are accessible and safe. UCC must continue to support biodiversity and access to green spaces on campus, but we must also look to the wider community, for example, promoting green spaces and biodiversity across the city. UCC is viewed as an island of green space and biodiversity within the city, and should engage with local residents, businesses and the council, to share its expertise, and promote the use and enhancement of green spaces across the city. This would also help to create pollinator corridors, and provide better connectivity between isolated pockets of biodiversity within the city.

UCC's commitment to maintaining and enhancing campus biodiversity through implementation of the UCC Biodiversity Action Plan, and All Ireland Pollinator Plan is welcome. However there is a perceived disconnect between this commitment, and some planned capital projects e.g. Curraheen and North Mall Campuses. There was a worry among participants that the continued development, expansion of the campus, and the construction of new buildings is encroaching on limited green spaces. Similarly, the location of some car parking facilities on main campus were perceived to have negative impacts on the quality of the public realm. The amount of green space on campus is an important metric in several ranking systems, such as the UI Green Metric. The removal of green spaces will cause UCC to drop in these rankings. A greater value should be put on our green spaces, and this should be considered in the planning of any new buildings.

Recycling and Waste Management

With a population of almost 25,000 people, and a campus with all of the attributes of a functioning town, the levels of waste generated by the activities of UCC are significant. Matters relating to waste management and disposal also attract attention because they are visible, and

perceived to be something sustainability conscious individuals can actively participate in. Workshop participants agreed that, on a national level, a major improvement on waste management and reduction of consumption levels is required if sustainability is going to be achieved throughout Ireland. The waste problem that our country faces, trickles down into every aspect of economic activity which takes place, including third level education institutions. Throughout UCC, it is evident that initiative has been taken to ensure that adequate waste facilities are in place to support students and staff in their own waste management practices. However, these facilities are only implemented in certain areas of campus, such as the library. It makes sense that attention to the types of bins that are available is centered in an area with heavy foot traffic, but in order for UCC to improve its waste management and recycling, these facilities must be made accessible across all areas of the UCC campus. Waste management goes beyond the scope of providing recycling and compost bins. Waste management starts with monitoring and reducing unnecessary consumption, where recycling should be the last port of call. Participants had suggestions such as the creation of a “Library of Things” for UCC. There was general consensus that UCC needs to move towards a circular economy approach, incorporating full life cycle and product longevity into purchasing and procurement, altering consumer behaviours, and reducing the amount of waste we as an institution are producing. Renewing and expanding UCC’s commitment to going single-use plastic free will be an important step as campus reopens.

Energy, Water and Climate Change

An estimated 44,119 tCO₂e were emitted by UCC during the 2017-2018 Academic Year. 13% and 32% of GHG emissions were attributed to Scope 1 & 2 activities respectively (i.e. energy consumed by UCC). Significantly, some 55% of GHG emissions were attributed to Scope 3 activities, including commuting, business travel and procurement. The government’s Climate Action Plan (2019) requires public sector bodies to reduce carbon emissions by 50% by 2030 and achieve net neutrality by 2050. However, workshop participants brought up several times that UCC should be striving to be carbon neutral by 2030. As things currently stand, this would prove very difficult without a heavy reliance on carbon offsetting. However many participants believe that ambitious goals like this can act as the needed drive for action. It is acknowledged that developing meaningful offsetting projects will be an essential tool in achieving this, but our primary focus should be on reducing our emissions.

Academic and business travel represents a massive 15% of UCC’s total carbon footprint. Many participants expressed concerns over the amount of international travel that academics must do to attend conferences and other academic affairs. Implementing departmental carbon budgets was a suggested solution by several staff members. The past year has shown that we have the ability to work remotely and attend conferences online. However, if carbon travel budgets are put in place, we must ensure that they are equitable and that people are not

unfairly disadvantaged. Leadership and accountability from university management in reducing their air miles is key to getting staff to buy into the system.

UCC has made significant inroads in increasing its energy efficiency over the past decade, despite growth in population size and substantial expansion of campus. However government targets are now for absolute reductions as opposed to energy efficiency per capita or meter square. Retrofitting our current buildings, and more efficient use of already existing spaces is essential. UCC continues to expand and build new buildings, while it does not utilise its current space fully. The more we build, the more energy we consume, the more water we consume, the more embodied carbon in construction materials we consume, and the greater the impact we have on the climate and planet.

While expanding our onsite renewable energy generation is important, taking action toward more community energy generation projects offers unique benefits. Furthermore, investing in renewable energy projects such as wind and solar farms, can be used to offset the university's energy requirements.

Modes of online learning are often proposed as a potential solution to some of our space, commuting and energy challenges, however concerns have been expressed over the potential environmental consequences of reliance on online infrastructure, and the energy footprint of data sharing and storage. Further research into and careful planning of online learning models will be essential but a hybrid model of teaching, where in person lectures are recorded and made available on Canvas, could reduce travel costs and emissions, as students may choose not to commute every day. This could also make material more accessible to those who may struggle to attend lectures consistently, and help to reduce day-to-day energy usage on campus.

Procurement and Contracts

Procurement of goods and services accounts for 19% of the university's carbon footprint. Participants felt that a greater effort needs to be made to reduce the unnecessary purchasing of goods. It was recognised that devolved procurement across research projects and departments represents a challenge in terms of procurement duplication and opportunities exist to better utilise existing resources on campus. Where goods and services are being procured, efforts should be made to ensure that they are sustainable and ethical. UCC must put a greater emphasis on incorporating a circular economic model into its procurement. It is necessary to factor in the lifetime and end of life of equipment, which ties into waste management. The substantial purchasing power that UCC has should be used to drive suppliers towards supplying more sustainable options. Sustainability includes the social aspect of our procurements and contracts also. UCC should develop a more robust investment policy, which emphasises environmental and social wellbeing over profits, and divest from unethical suppliers. There was

a consensus that embedding sustainability and social responsibility into the procurement process requires specialist knowledge and can be demanding of time and resources, as such it is imperative that staff are trained and adequately resourced to do so.

With regard to UCC's carbon footprint, tenders for capital projects and construction activities emissions fall under procurement. The university continues to build and expand, which is leading to higher emissions. Every effort should be made to reduce the amount of building, and reevaluate the need for unsustainable expansion. Where building is deemed necessary, UCC should first aim to renovate existing buildings, and where that is not possible, sustainable alternatives should be used during the construction process.

Commuting and Transport

Staff and student commuting amounts to about 20% of UCC's carbon footprint, with the per capita emissions of the staff commute more than double that of the student commute. At present approximately 64% of staff and 31% of students commute to campus by car as their primary mode of transport. This represents a serious challenge for UCC, as we commit to climate action. Substantial effort must be made to transition to active and low carbon modes of transport.

At a local level, UCC must promote active travel such as walking and cycling. There are many barriers to active travel, requiring interventions at an infrastructural and behavioural level. Workshop participants highlighted three main barriers to cycling: lack of experience; not feeling safe as a cyclist; and lack of knowledge of the rules of the road. Efforts must be taken to facilitate a cultural shift towards cycling that equips beginner cyclists with the skills and knowledge to safely commute. Similarly drivers need to be educated in how to respectfully and safely share the roads with cyclists and pedestrians.

A large element of helping cyclists feel safer is the provision of safe cycling infrastructure. There are several dangerous junctions near UCC, and cyclists frequently report the obstruction of cycle lanes by parked vehicles and debris. UCC must use its position as the largest educational institution in Cork, and a major stakeholder of the city, to lobby the City Council for the provision, maintenance and enforcement of high quality cycling infrastructure. This should come in the form of more segregated bike lanes, secure and covered bike storage. UCC should also advocate for the expansion of the Coke Bikes network, and ensure that sufficient investment is going into the maintenance of these bikes. UCC should push for greater investment in active transport infrastructure such as the Lee-to-Sea Greenway.

On campus, a lot can be done to promote cycling as current infrastructure on campus is not adequate to cater for demand. Proper facilities on campus, including safe, secure and covered

bike sheds are needed. Bike repair stations on campus, and additional shower facilities and wet gear lockers are required. UCC must communicate the benefits of cycling to its students and staff, and put initiatives in place to encourage and incentivise the uptake of cycling. A significant cultural shift away from driving needs to occur, senior figures of the university community leading by example with their commute will contribute to this shift. To bring this change about UCC must also reevaluate the availability of parking on campus, and charge for parking in line with the true cost of car use. These charges could then be used to subsidise cycling through grants for bikes and cycling gear.

As well as promoting active travel, UCC needs to campaign for a strong public transport network. Together with our peers throughout the city, UCC should be an active advocate for sustainable public transport alternatives, supporting a move towards electrification of public transport, a reduction in the cost of public transport, and more regular and reliable services. This requires continuous participation in the city and county planning and development processes. For students and staff that are commuting from further away, park and ride services and carpooling initiatives should be incentivised to reduce the amount of private cars coming into the city.

Recommendations

Following 'Build Back Better', the Green Campus Committee proposes a series of recommendations that we implore the senior management of UCC, including the Governing Body, UMT and ALF, to adopt.

Sustainability Citizenship

- **Accountability & Participation:** The community must be able to actively participate in the decision making process, and to hold the university to account on matters that impact the future of our planet. Accountability mechanisms need to be in place, and every member of the UCC community should be afforded the opportunity to participate in decision-making within UCC that may have implications for climate change.
- **Commit to a Climate Justice and Just Transition approach to our climate action.** We have a responsibility to ensure that the communities that will be most affected by climate change are supported through direct action within UCC.

Teaching and Learning

- **Building on the success of the SDG Toolkit and recognising that the role of supporting educators to integrate sustainability into the curriculum is distinct from that of delivering sustainability in facilities and operations, we advocate for the creation of a full time, and adequately resourced Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) Officer.**

Research

- **Green Lab Certification.** The University should put the needed resources into systematically achieving Green Lab Certification across all research facilities. We must set ambitious targets to reduce the waste output from our labs, and improve the energy efficiency of our research.

Food, Health & Wellbeing

- **Promote and subsidise sustainable food choices on campus, ensuring that plant based meals are affordable and readily accessible in outlets across campus**

Landscape, Heritage and Natural Resources

- Continue to enhance biodiversity on campus, and work to share expertise with the local community, local businesses, and the City Council.
- Commit to no further loss of green spaces, semi-natural habitats or biodiversity on campus.

Recycling and Waste Management

- UCC should bring forward its goal of a plastic free campus from 2023 to 2022. This should strive to include as much laboratory equipment as possible.

Energy, Water and Climate Change

- Develop an ambitious Climate Action Plan for Scope, 1, 2 and 3 emissions, mapping a pathway for UCC to achieve Net-Zero emissions by 2030.
- Invest in renewable energy generation both on campus and off campus, and work to retrofit more buildings with energy efficient technologies.
- Building on lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic, reduce flying emissions from academic business travel by 50% from pre Covid levels, by 2023.
- Show leadership on Climate Action, lobby local and national government to take more urgent action on the climate crisis. Make sustainability a primary focus in consultations and submissions to local and national government.

Procurement and Contracts

- Adopt a circular economic model in the University for all procurement and business practices, and reduce the amount of single use and non repairable items that are purchased.

Commuting and Transport

- Bike Sheds and Facilities. Improved biking facilities, including secure, covered bike sheds, and lockers and changing facilities for cyclists.

- De-prioritise the availability of car parking spaces on campus, allowing for provision of cycling infrastructure and enhancement of the public realm. Charge for parking in line with the true cost of car use.
- Urgently create a plan to dramatically reduce single occupancy private car usage by 50% by 2025, in line with achieving climate action targets for 2030.

Expansion & Growth

- Move away from unsustainable growth. The constant growth of UCC and the construction of new buildings has a large impact on GHG emissions and waste, through this continued expansion we are removing green spaces, which will damage our international rankings. We must move to use our existing resources more efficiently, and adopt a stance of renovating buildings instead of construction of new builds.

Resourcing & Personnel

- Recognising that a whole-institution approach to sustainability is a far reaching, diverse and demanding task that requires multiple skills, and specialist knowledge, we suggest that appropriate levels of fully resourced, full-time personnel are in place to adequately meet the sustainability obligations of an institution of such scale.

Conclusion

Achieving these recommendations will not be easy, and perhaps some uncomfortable decisions will have to be made. However, UCC must act with the urgency that is needed to limit the environmental and humanitarian disaster that climate change is causing. As an institution, we pride ourselves on our green image and UCC is continuously one of the highest ranking universities in the world in sustainability metrics. We cannot stand still. We must drive forward. We must “Build Back Better”, and use this opportunity to strive for a greener, more equitable future for everyone. We can not leave people behind in our pursuit of a sustainable future, and as an institution, we must recognise our privilege and our responsibility to act now. While we may be on the forefront of climate action, we will not be on the forefront of the impacts of climate change. We must ensure that as an institution, we are supporting communities most impacted by climate change in our actions.

These goals can only be achieved with continued support and investment into the hard work staff are doing in UCC, however, there is a need to increase the amount of resources we are allocating to the issue. Setting goals and targets is important, but it is important to heed the lesson from Wageningen University and Research, who top the UI Green Metrics Rankings:

“Mapping out strategies and formulating policies is easily done, but sustainable development does not happen by itself. A driving force is needed, responsible persons need to be appointed.”

As an institution of great scale UCC has the capacity to have far reaching positive impacts on our local community, wider society and the future of the planet. By immediately taking ambitious action to improve our environmental performance, taking care to meet our social responsibilities, and by ensuring that our graduates are equipped with the knowledge, values and skills of sustainability we can ensure impactful and long lasting change.

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